DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 382 941 CS 012 155

AUTHOR Baghban, Marcia
TITLE A READING Teacher's View of Children's Literature.
PUB DATE Jun 95
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Children's Literature Association (Durham, NH, June 1-4, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; Course Descriptions; Elementary Education; *Literature Appreciation; Parent Child Relationship; Preservice Teacher Education; *Reading Attitudes; Reading Instruction; Reading Teachers
IDENTIFIERS City University of New York Queens College

ABSTRACT

The dichotomy a teacher educator experienced as a child between reading library books and "store-bought" books at home and reading the textbooks in school turned out to fuel major debates in the teaching of reading. She always believed that she had learned to read with books--she simply endured the school readers to get through school. The true test of her beliefs came when she became a mother. She instilled in her daughter and son a love of reading from infancy. A Reading and Children's Literature course she teaches at Queens College in the Elementary and Early Childhood Education department focuses on the literature rather than an emphasis on reading methods. The course begins with a debate over the definition of children's literature. Students develop a log in which they review two children's books per week. The teacher and students read aloud. By the end of the course, each student must teach a short lesson using a children's book. The course ends with the preparation of learning centers in which each student designs an activity related to children's books. Students' final exams echo the teacher's personal inclinations. By the end of the course, students remember why they love to read, a love they will pass on to children. (RS)

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ED 382 941

A READING Teacher's View of Children's Literature

Paper presented in the invited panel "Kaleidoscope: Looking at the Literature of Childhood Through Three Lenses", at the annual Children's Literature Association Conference, the University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire, June 1-4, 1995

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Dr. Marcia Baghban
Associate Professor
Elementary Education
Queens College, The City
University of New York
65-30 Kissena Boulevard
Flushing, NY 11367-1597

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A READING Teacher's View of Children's Literature

Since many of you in this room are teachers, it would be presumptuous of me to speak for everyone. So I shall discuss my perspective on the power of children's literature, in particular, the power of children's literature in the teaching of reading. Therefore, I need to tell you something about my own journey toward understanding the place of books in my life.

When I was in first grade, my father began to take me to the public library every Friday after school. His brother had a daughter my age and as my uncle's family grew, my cousin joined in these Friday excursions and stayed overnight at our house. As we became older, after the library visit, we were allowed one dollar a piece and one hour to shop in a downtown department store. We always went to the book department. We both rejected Nancy Drew and Cherry Ames but fell in love with Judy Bolton, a less popular character who also had her own series. We each bought a different book in the series. The night my cousin stayed over, I read her book and she read mine. In this way, after she went home, I always felt I still had a new book to read. I am sure she felt the same way. We knew we were readers, we loved reading, and we were reading for ourselves.

In school, I read about Dick and Jane. They were blond. I was brunette. Their mother stayed home. My mother left home every day to go to work. Nevertheless, I was grateful even for the little episodes in the lives of Dick and Jane because I knew that as soon as their stories ended we would have to take out our workbooks. Even today, I remember sighing when the paragraphs ended and my reading group had to

pull out the fill-in-the blank pages. My group struggled together to get the job done, and we did. The teacher told us we were readers because we were in the top reading group, we hated reading, and our reading was for the teacher.

No matter what happened in my classes, as I continued through school, I continued to read for myself. In college one night when I should have been studying biology, I stayed up weeping over the compassion and lack of compassion in the play Tea and Sympathy. The issues in literature and the love of language sounds directed me to a major in French. I got certified in secondary and elementary teaching, and after some classroom experience, I decided I should be a native speaker who taught my first language in order to better come up with on-the-spot examples for my students. I went back to school at Teachers College, Columbia and got a master's degree in ESL. After several more years teaching speaking, listening, reading and writing in English in NYC and with Columbia Team in Kabul, Afghanistan, I decided I should become better at one language skill. I started on a doctorate in reading at Indiana University.

The dichotomy that I had experienced as a child between reading library books and store bought books at home and reading the textbooks in school turned out to fuel major debates in the teaching of reading. Until this graduate program, I had had no idea that WHAT you use to learn to read could be so controversial. I always believed that I had learned to read with books. I simply endured the school readers to get through school. Then, In my graduate classes, I encountered the works of FrankSmith. He hammered over and over in his writings, "You learn to read by reading." His words

touched all of us who read his books. "That's it," we inquiring graduate students thought. "He's found the way." But when we went into the schools, we found that those reading textbooks endured.

The true test of my beliefs came in my last year of coursework when I became a mother. There is nothing like parenthood to make one take a position! I of course wanted to get my daughter into Frank Smith's Literacy Club. Should I use books or textbooks? After all, I did want her to succeed in school. Shouldn't I start immediately on the alphabet? But, I reasoned, while I myself had taught skills, I was a process learner. And hadn't my love of reading kept me going? I decided to trust this instinct, and I started in her infancy with Pat the Bunny. I read to her and she acted out the routines in the book. As young as 18 months, if a book fell on the floor, she picked it up and looked at it rightside up, turning the pages from left to right. By two years, she noticed "stop" and "exit" in the outside world and joined the "m" in "McDonald's" to the "m" in "mom". She generated the alphabet herself through the words she saw and the letters in her name. At three years, she looked at the pictures in her books and babbled a story to her dolls and pets. By four years, as I read, she picked out familiar words. Every morning she woke me up with at least five books to read. She put books everywhere so she could always grab one easily. In her later school grades, she was always able to juggle the plots of at least three chapter books at a time, a few in the house and a few in the car.

After her brother was born and as soon as he got home from the hospital, she was leaning over the edge of his crib showing him the pictures in books. She saved

her books for him and would often read to him even as he crawled. When he became older, she sometimes used reading to calm him, but more often they would both be lost in the same story. She helped him join the Literacy Club. Their examples affirmed my own childhood reading experiences. I felt as a child, as I saw through my children, the power of books. These intuitions became the foundation of my academic decisions.

At Queens College, the Elementary and Early Childhood Education Department views children's literature from the perspectives of both appreciation and application. Our Department has a special program for entering students whose undergraduate major was not education but who want to become elementary classroom teachers. One required course for such students is entitled, "Reading and Children's Literature". I teach this course with a focus on the literature rather than an emphasis on reading methods. It has been my experience that these future teachers, like many parents, will use real books to help children learn to read.

We begin by debating the definition of children's literature. Is children's literature literature determined FOR children, such as those books given Newbery and Caldecott Awards, or is it literature determined BY children, such as the Children's Choices list complied by IRA from the books that childen take out of public libraries. We argue over issues such as whether ethnic literature deserves a month's celebration or whether it should be integrated throughout the year's reading in the classroom. We experience genres. Students perform short plays and read aloud poem cycles. But these are students who may have no contact with children, who never go into a

bookstore, or who lost their library cards, and so I must get many books into their hands and show them the kinds of classroom uses these books may have.

The students develop a log in which they review two children's books per week, totaling 30 books by the end of the semester. They must learn how to write an academic citation, a summary of the content of each book, their response or reaction to the book, and ways they might use the book with children. These logs are lengthy projects that become invaluable resources to them when they teach. Many students include tables of contents and even categorize the books into themes. This project goes on outside of our class.

Inside class, I read aloud to the whole class every time we meet. The students read to each other in small groups. They try different ways to hold a book when reading aloud. They remember their right audience and their left audience. They practice expressive dialogue. Then they read to the whole class. After the read aloud experience, once again in small groups, they look at a book and begin to generate possiblities for more activities than just a discussion of the book after the reading. We talk about author studies, character studies, and themes across several books. We then move into using the books for content area activities.

By the end of the course, each student must teach a short lesson using a book itself, characters from a book, or information from a book. The rest of the class participates in the activity. Students enjoy this microteaching experience immensely. Many of them have never stood in front of a group, directed numbers of people, or explained anything to a group. Each student summarizes the directions and materials

for the activity in a handout, and distributes a copy to class members. In this way, when the microteaching is done, the students have a booklet of activities for immediate use as substitutes and first year teachers.

The course ends with the preparation of learning centers in which each student designs an activity related to children's books and leaves the center with directions and necessary materials to go try out classmates' centers. Some centers are so spectacular, they invite picture-taking. I have had at least four students that I know reproduce their centers while student teaching, impressing school principals enough to invite them to work at the schools. Since the days of whole class reading with students who finish at the same time are fading, learning centers can provide needed extra practice for students or provide creative experiences in writing while the teacher conferences with small groups of students. I have found them useful in classroom management myself, and the centers are a good way to end the course.

Students respond to their teacher's model of language, and my students' final exams echo my personal inclinations. My personal experiences with my daughter and current research paralleling learning to speak, read, and write are indicated in the following student's answer to the question, "You are a first year teacher in an elementary school that uses basal readers. How will you incorporate children's books in your classroom?" The student begins:

> I would like to incorporate children's books into my classroom as similarly as possible to the reading program outlined by Regie Routman in Transitions. Her goal is to use the research studies of natural literacy learners to develop a positive reading environment in the elementary classroom. These studies list environmental factors common to almost all early readers, such as reading to a child (often the same book repeatedly), seeing a parent, grandparent, sister,

> etc. model reading, availability and utilization of a wide variety of reading materials (especially storybooks), involvement with writing as scribbling, copying, or dictation, and positive, quality literacy interactions with the child.

Frank Smith's Reading Without Nonsense, the course's second textbook, supports the perspective of keeping literacy learning as natural as possible.

The activities in our graduate class prompt another student to answer the question, "Select one practical idea from Transitions. Tell why you chose this idea and how you could use it in your classroom".:

> I selected the practical idea of literature extension activities because I thought these activities were a great complement to liteature. I am speaking through the exciting experience of actually creating over thirty literature activities in our Response Logs and implementing one activity with the class. Also, I experienced the activities of classmates in our course. In place of busy workbooks and monotonous worksheets, I saw how literature activities can give students enjoyment, provide stimulating challenges, incite creative growth, and allow for social interaction. I can see how these activities can keep the excitement of a book alive way after the book is finished.
>
> Literature extension activities can include any meaningful extension of a good book, especially if it requires the child to reexamine the text and the illustrations. These activities can include rereading of stories, retelling of stories, comparing different versions of a tale, categorizing stories with similar themes, illustrating favorite scenes and characters, acting out a story, rewriting a story into a play, listing alternative solutions for a problem in a story, writing stories for wordless picture books, making a mural from the story, and analyzing all the books by one author.

This student's enthusiasm is clear. She has learned from personal experience and from her readings.

By the end of the course, my students have found their separate ways back to the public library, and they have chosen their favorite authors. They remember what it is like to begin a book and look up at the clock to find they have been lost in that book

for hours. They remember the saddness that comes with knowing the ending of a wonderful book is just a few pages away and that another book by the same author might not be so wonderful. They remember the enthusiasm that comes with recommending a great book to a friend. They remember the communion that comes from finding someone who has enjoyed the same book that they have enjoyed. They remember the good feeling that comes with closing the cover after finishing a book. They remember why they love to read. This love they will pass on to children.